

TEACHING EFFECTIVE, PRACTICAL RADIO-COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ENGLISH: ONE APPROACH

Abstract

At Embry-Riddle, we use both professionally trained English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor and a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in a class simultaneously. The ESL person manages the class and designs lessons to ensure language acquisition; the SME keeps the subject matter used appropriate and relevant. We have found that by doing this and by using a student-centered model of class design that both motivation and language retention remain high.

Our approach is solidly based on well-established methods from the professional English language-training field and is fused with specific knowledge and tasks trainees must master to fly aircraft. A critical part of our approach to language training is avoiding the one-sidedness of a class run solely by either an English teacher who has no knowledge of flight or a veteran flyer with no knowledge of instructing English language. This balance of expertise provides the students flight knowledge and language practice, satisfying both their wants and their needs.

Use of this approach has produced positive results in both our ab initio pilot and ATC English courses; furthermore, we have received repeat business from all our clients as well as positive reviews in the national media.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Children have an easy time acquiring language because the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is operative in their brains until--quite unfairly for adults attempting to learn a new language--at about age twelve, it switches off. Perhaps you know of someone who, when they were young, spoke another language but now can't recall a single word of the language they spoke fluently as a child. The LAD is just a convenient term used to talk about this phenomenon, but there does seem to be an innate ability to acquire language present in children that becomes dulled by the passage of time. It is certainly reasonable to say that, for most people, learning to use another language effectively in the workplace would be quite a task for even the most diligent person

given all the other elements of life that pull at a person's time and energy.

With that in mind, and knowing the goal of adult language training is for the learner to attain a functional level of fluency in the target language, classes must be treated quite differently than any ordinary language class one might find on, say, a college campus. Many times these kind of classes are guided toward the understanding of the literature or culture of another country, and while this certainly has merit, it does not meet the goals of the international flight student who knows how to fly but can't communicate non-standard situations to ATCers. The goal of flight English training is for the adult to carry out the daily tasks of flying in the second language. This kind of class must take on a distinct nature. Adults have specific styles of learning that, when understood by the instructor, can be used to facilitate acquisition. Adult learning is also affected by factors existing in the learning environment. It is therefore important to be aware of these factors and find ways of overcoming them.

Affective factors to keep in mind are the learner's perception of how needs are being met, perceptions of quality of instruction and instructors, and reaction to the training environment, to name but a few. It is important for the students in a specialized field to view the language class as a valuable asset to their professional development. The type of room chosen for a language seminar is important and will impact student opinion of the training firm's commitment to quality. If the facility does not reflect this same commitment, students will see this a lack of the institution's devotion to quality training.

Lack of attention to individual learning styles is also an affective factor in training situations. The person who needs to have lots of visual input to learn but only gets lecture could miss a lot of information and become frustrated whereas another highly auditory learner would be perfectly happy in the lecture environment.

In a professional language-training situation, it is important to design classes with the specific goals of the learner in mind and with the learners as the focal point of the classroom. Adult learners learn best by being involved in what they are learning. The teacher that finds a way to involve the students with the language they will need to use on the job effectively will have the best chance of succeeding in their training goals.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES (ESP)

Fluency is certainly not something that can be achieved in a short training program, though positive results can be accomplished. Because there is no magic bullet or quick fix for language deficiency, consistent, well-planned programs usually work best. A program that is designed to provide training at specific intervals during, say, an ab initio flight training program allows the beginning pilots to become comfortable with their newly acquired language skill before beginning each new language learning session. By providing smaller, task-focused sections of new language to the student and allowing the class to practice this language in a simulated performance environment, the student can focus on the particular segment of fluency needed for that task or work environment.

When designing a syllabus for an effective ESP course it is important to recycle the language segments, vocabulary, and concepts from earlier lessons into later lessons. By doing this, the trainer reinforces the previous material's link to what follows empowering the trainee by reinforcing continuity in acquisition.

It must be noted here that aviation English could be said to inhabit a rather narrow band of all possible English language. This might be true in terms of ATC communication of specific flight procedures as well as other rather codified aviation talk. Aviation is a profession concerned with expected communication, especially when we're talking about ATC. Therefore, a diligent individual taking an aviation language training class could become highly proficient within this narrow band of specific English and still not be able to communicate in the face of an in-flight emergency. However, in the event of emergencies and other nonstandard communication as well as general communication on the ground about the various things concerning a flight including weather, maintenance, local area, etc., a pilot needs a strong base in general

English in order to be comfortable with all these interactions.

A training course can address this issue of general fluency by building group discussion activities into the course to give trainees a chance to use their language skills to communicate about flying rather than always focusing on flight itself. Role-plays focusing on non-flight activities can also help to increase general fluency.

EFFECTIVE TRAINING TECHNIQUES

Effective training involves the trainee in the learning process. It also uses the trainee as the focal point of lessons, meaning that responsibility for performance in class is shifted to the trainee rather than the trainer. This might sound like a copout for the teacher, but it actually takes more planning and preparation to create an effective student-centered learning activity than it does to prepare for a lecture-type class. Learners take more responsibility for their own learning in this type of environment. Small group and pair work gives learners enough control to make them active rather than passive learners.

One idea for an activity in an ab initio language training class might be to divide a class of, say, ten people into groups of two and give them short scripts of standard radio calls from various portions of a flight. Then have each pair work separately to memorize the calls. After a certain amount of time has passed each pair would say the calls aloud with the idea being to see which group could produce the clearest pronunciation and cadence. To put the lesson in context, the instructor could show a sectional chart of an appropriate area and the class could talk about the reasons for how the radio calls were said.

Another idea is to use audio or videotaping to illustrate to language students how others perceive their speech. This has to be taken seriously by instructors and all effort must be taken not to appear to be embarrassing students, especially if they are young beginners. There are also cultural aspects of this to be aware of, but unfortunately not enough space here to take the issue up.

To have effective training, one must try to keep students active in the class; language learning is a dynamic process and an instructor should leave class knowing that the students spoke much more than he or she did each day. Use anything that

allows the students to be involved in a flight-related task using the target language. Use as much real materials as possible and move the class around. Move them around in the room, have them do checklists in an airplane, have them do out of class interviews with pilots and take notes and report on it orally. All these things are good training techniques for the aviation language classroom. Remember that the language class can be one of the worst or one of the best experiences of an international student's flight training career. By creating a language training environment that the trainee perceives as having meaning to his or her future career, you have done a lot to provide a positive, valuable experience for trainees.

TRAINING RESOURCES MATERIALS

Though it may in many cases be preferable, it is not always necessary to have elaborate high-tech training facilities in order to facilitate effective language training. In fact, using a simulator device, in the case of less experienced pilots, might get in the way of language learning since it would tend to give too much cognitive overload. The more experienced the pilot becomes, the more real the training should be if possible, but even experienced private pilots entering IFR training can profit by receiving language training in a standard classroom if the class is set up to produce maximum effectiveness.

WHAT AND HOW WE TEACH

At Embry-Riddle Language Institute we currently offer two courses of English which help prepare pilots in training to communicate effectively in English. We offer these courses on a contract basis only, one for pilots, the other for controllers, and are currently designing another for airline pilots who want to improve their spoken English in the aviation field. We also provide similar classes to ERAU flight students in a support role to our flight department.

We typically team-teach the classes, using both a professional language trainer and a professional pilot. Together, they create the syllabus for the classes with a focus on particular communication tasks and procedures that occur in all phases of a flight. These tasks are then broken into sections, such as "Ramping out," "Contacting Ground," "Getting a Clearance," and so on. Here, I'm using an example of a beginning-level communication class, but this approach works for any level of flight expertise. The focus on real tasks and actual

flight language situations keeps interest high while maintaining good language learning strategies in the classroom.

These courses are taught in a normal classroom and the only special materials needed are a large diagram of the training area airport and some small plastic model planes. The diagram needs to be large enough to lay on a table and put the planes on the simulated Ramp, taxiways, etc. The two instructors play the various parts of Ground, Tower, Departure, and so on letting the trainees speak the part of the pilot while moving the planes around the board and the room to help develop situational awareness. We also listen to the ATIS allowing the class to use their listening skills to help them make decisions or avoid trouble in the airport area.

Create makeshift obstacles or landmarks, use recordings of local traffic and typed transcripts of these organized into a logical flow and labeled according to the portion of the flight in which the communication occurs. With these simple materials an effective Pilot English class can be made. Of course, each class must be designed in accordance to the needs of that particular class and my description is meant only as an example of a pre-VFR local procedures course.

No matter what the class type, we insist the students learn to use correct English grammar and pronunciation when asking questions and making radio calls. There is a tight focus on proper pronunciation and description of surroundings. Our experience has been that the better a foreign pilot can pronounce the sounds of English, the more likely he/she is to get help and a positive attitude from ATC. We focus on these two aspects all throughout these courses. Our courses have been successful here at Embry-Riddle. We have had a loyal following from the international student body as well as compliments from relieved flight instructors, so something must be working.